

Hiking in Mayfield



Our family lived at number 9, St. Joseph's Park, Mayfield, Cork from 1956 onwards. Occasionally a group of us boys (mere girls were never allowed to join us) would *"go on a hike."* This would be organized quite spontaneously during the summer months, when a particularly sunny morning dawned. For some reason we hated getting up early during the school year, when we needed to, but it was no problem being out on the floor at 6:30 AM during the summer, when we were free to lie abed all day. So a group of us would get together out in the park (a grassy field surrounded on three sides by 34 country council houses) and plan the day's activities. We might decide on a hurling tournament, or an athletic competition, or somebody would be sure to propose that we go *"slock an orchard"* (steal apples). Then someone would say, *"What about goin' on a hike? 'Tis ages since we went on a hike!"* There would be a chorus of *"Yea, yea, come on an' we go on a hike."*

We'd brainstorm for half an hour. We'd need a hatchet for chopping firewood, a box of matches, a frying pan, newspapers to start the fire, rashers, sausages, eggs, white puddings, black puddings, bread, butter, jam, salt and pepper, knives and forks and spoons, mugs, plates, potatoes, a pot, knapsacks (or school bags) to carry all the loot, hurleys (in lieu of machetes to battle our way through elephant grass), a whistle (to summon the troop for all major components of the day), tea, sugar and milk, and some biscuits. We'd assign the acquisition of different items to different people, and arrange to meet again in half hour. There would, inevitably, have to be some minor

changes in plan: Billy Attridge's mother wouldn't let him bring their frying pan, 'cause we used their pan the last time, and why couldn't someone else bring a pan this time?! Patrick Reilly's mother wouldn't let him come today because he had to go to the dentist to get three teeth pulled; Billy Owens' sister squealed on him, and his mother retrieved the packet of sausages that he was hiding in his pocket; Michael Flannery ate most of the biscuits, while he was waiting for the rest of us to arrive; Steven Buckley had to go back home three times to dress his bed, until he got it to his mother's satisfaction.

It wasn't easy, organizing the safari, but, eventually, the whistle would be blown and we'd troop off. The girls would pretend not to be jealous, and the littler kids would dance around us until we picked up speed and left them disdainfully in our dust. It was a point of honor with us, never to walk on roadways; the whole trip had to be cross-country. We'd always start off by going across some of Mr. Spillane's fields. It was an act of bravado to pass through a field in which his bull and herd of cows were grazing. We'd sneak up to the ditch and then one by one jump into the field and race across for the opposite ditch. In Ireland a "ditch" is not your normal trench, but rather a sturdy three-foot wide, five-foot high solid wall of stone and clay, normally clothed in brambles and topped by a mop of blackberry bushes. It was no mean feat "*conquering*" a ditch, and the scratches and bloodied arms and legs were the honorable wounds of the battle. No self-respecting hiker would come back without them. Frayed jerseys and torn shirts were optional for the braver souls who didn't flinch at the inevitable motherly tirade at the day's end.

To add spice to the field hopping, there was an unspoken agreement that all bovines (of whatever size or gender) were actually huge "mad bulls." We'd scream encouragement at each other, thus *alerting* the "mad bulls." The younger kids might have a bigger brother carry their knapsack for the dash, and there would be plenty of eager hands to help them up the opposite ditch at the end of the wild scramble.

We'd rest, panting, in a "safe" (bovine-less) field and tell how the "mad bulls" almost caught us. This was often more frightening for the faint-hearted than the actual run itself; and, of course, there was a repeat performance to be faced on our return journey. Moreover, there would be many more mad-bull-infested fields yet ahead of us on the outward journey.

Occasionally, a hurley or a pot would be dropped in mid-field and there would be a big debate as to whose responsibility it was to retrieve it, the kid who owned it or the kid who was carrying it. It wasn't easy being a leader on these expeditions; you had to learn how to be quartermaster, land-surveyor, cartographer, therapist, cook, firelighter, referee, nurse and storyteller.

The lead scout would tell us what the up-coming field held, and what kinds of diversions we needed to make in order to avoid areas in which he felt pythons, rabid jackals or hungry tigers might be lurking. The group would draw a little closer after such a report, but there was no turning back.

When we reckoned we had traveled about 100 miles, we'd stop for lunch. On the off chance that someone spotted a signpost, when we had to cross over a tarmac road, and reported that it said, "*Cork 9 miles*", we'd scoff at his naïveté. Didn't he realize that the native savages of this uncharted territory, intentionally altered road signs to lull unsuspecting travelers into a false sense of security! His protests would be disdainfully demolished, and someone would volunteer a true story ("*I swear 'tis true; me Uncle told me!*") in which an accidental intruder into this very region was cannibalized and never heard of again.

The whistle would eventually be blown in the center of a suitable field (nearby stream, short grass, and no "mad bulls") and tasks assigned once more. Stones would be gathered into a circle. Sticks would be collected and the fire lit in the stone circle (We hadn't yet heard of Newgrange and Stonehenge, but the archetype came through us anyway). Four or five kids would be purple-faced from blowing on the reluctant flames, and straw and paper added in copious amounts, until the God of fire reluctantly agreed that we weren't going to give up. The frying pan would be set on three smaller stones in the middle of the fire, and a huge lump of butter tossed into it until it sizzled into a yellow, spluttering, bubbling liquid half an inch deep. We would break eight or nine eggs into it, followed by rashers, sausages, black and white puddings, some beans, and chunks of potatoes. Inevitably, the whole mass would be cooked until it liquefied into an indescribable soup in which no one item any longer retained even the remotest resemblance to its original size, shape or substance. If I had thought about it, at the time, which I didn't, it would have made an excellent metaphor for the death of

ego-centric attributes that is necessary for the emergence of the Self; or the melting pot that is Silicon Valley which has the greatest mixture of peoples, cultures and languages in any area of planet earth. But I was 10 years shy of such theology, then, and 30 years short of such sociology. So I drank my eggs-puddings-rashers-sausages-beans-potato soup out of a mug, like everybody else, and mopped up the residue with generous cuts of Nana's homemade bread.

As soon as the frying pan had been lovingly licked clean, the kettle would be filled from the stream and we'd make the tea. The water would be boiled, then a fist-full of tea leaves stirred into it, followed by several fistfuls of sugar and a half bottle of milk. The mixture would be boiled for several more minutes and the resultant tar poured into the same greasy mugs that formerly cradled the "soup." The biscuits (cookies) would now be produced, with admonitions from the leader that some must be kept for the perilous return journey, which might find us stranded for several months if a hurricane were to happen or a snow blizzard, or if the savage natives were to chase us up an oak tree.

Now it was story time around the revived fire. It wouldn't be dark enough for ghost stories, so we'd make do with describing the latest movie we had seen (accompanying ourselves with perfect sound effects).

As the sun began to settle in the West, the whistle would be blown. Several kettles of water would be poured over the fire and the stones. The hiss of the pure white steam was music to our ears (30 years later I would sit half-naked in a dark little mud hut in Aptos, California, with a group of friends, while a Native American Medicine Woman poured cold water on large, red-hot rocks, as we began a Sweat Lodge spiritual liturgy). All of our belongings would be packed and the troop would move off.

'Twould be dark by the time we got back to Mr. Spillane's field, and now even the biggest and bravest of us would be anxious. We'd have no clue where the mad bulls might be hiding. As sure as God they'd have heard us coming several fields back, and would have put their heads together and planned an ambush. 'Twould be tantalizing. In the distance we'd be able to see the lights of St. Joseph's Park. *"What'll we do? Will we all make a dash for it together? Will we sprint across the field singly? Or should we try to sneak across slowly?"* All of this would be discussed in frightened whispers, with

someone whispering louder than the rest of us telling us to *"shut us, yee shaggin' eejits, ye're making so much noise dat dere bound to hear yee!!"*

Though we all heard stories of how farmer Spillane regularly had to retrieve the punctured corpses of impaled kids off the horns of his mad bulls, I managed a 100% record of returned hiker vets, while I was the troop leader. No MIA's on my watch.

'Twas a wonder to God, I survived childhood at all, at all!

Namasté,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sean". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke extending to the left.

Tír na nÓg

September 2013